DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 798 PS 027 283

AUTHOR Seng, SeokHoon
TITLE Staff Development in Early Childhood Education: An Individualized Approach.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Educational Research Association Conference (Singapore, November 23-25, 1998).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Early Childhood Education; Individualized Programs; *Preschool Teachers; *Professional Development; Reflective Teaching

ABSTRACT

Research on staff development suggests that teachers are more likely to benefit from training if they are able to learn on their own. This paper examines staff development for early childhood professionals, focusing on the need for an individualized approach and applying the findings to preschool education in Singapore. The paper considers the evolution of staff development from a patchwork of courses and workshops into a systematic plan of professional growth and maintains that early childhood educators need further professional training beyond their initial degree. In addition, the paper points to the importance of opportunities for early childhood teachers to reflect upon their teaching and to assess their ability to cope with classroom problems. The paper identifies an individualized approach to staff development that considers the organizational dynamics of the school as the most effective approach. A 5-step process of individualized staff development as described by D. Clough (1991) is summarized: (1) teacher/principal planning conference; (2) professional growth activities; (3) progress update conference; (4) continued professional growth activities; and (5) summative teacher/principal conference. The paper concludes by noting that an individualized approach to early childhood teachers' professional development offers an alternative to the traditional inservice training program. (KB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 426 798

STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH

SeokHoon Seng
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University

Paper presented at the 1998 ERA (Educational Research Association) Conference

Enhancing Learning: Challenge of Integrating Thinking and Information Technology into the Curriculum

23-25 November 1998
Singapore

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Seng

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

PS027283

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Staff Development in Early Childhood Education: An Individualised Approach

During the past decade, there has been a myriad of research on staff development programmes and meta-analyses of these studies have shown that teachers are more likely to benefit from different types of training structures if they learn on their own. Until recently , the early childhood teacher has not been given such a variety of staff development opportunities. Most educators have viewed staff development as a process in improving the teachers' competence which the Ministry or school board is responsible for. The teachers themselves do not respond positively towards staff development if programmes are planned and implemented without adequate needs-assessment data. The focus today has shifted to the need for individual teachers to plan for their own self-improvement. In early childhood education, the need is even greater and staff development, if it is going to result in positive teacher change and growth , has to be placed on the shoulders of teachers themselves. In this paper, an individualised approach is suggested and the various steps are described as one possible way to deliver effective professional growth activities for the early childhood teachers.

Key words:

Staff development in early childhood educators/teachers
Professional development for preschool teachers
Individualised professional programmes in early childhood education

Staff Development in Early Childhood Development: An Individualised Approach

Introduction

During the past decade, there has been an array of research on staff development programs for teachers in the schools, colleges and universities. It was not till recently that educators have started to look at staff development in early childhood education as a personal and professional process which enhances the teachers' competencies in the kindergarten classrooms. With the advancement of information technology and rising expectations of higher and higher academic standards, teaching in the preschools today needs to be recharged with new skills, knowledge and a fresh outlook to prepare us and our young children cope with the challenges of the next century.

Staff development has generally been evolving from a patchwork of courses and workshops into a systematic procedure which ensures that practising teachers may regularly enhance their academic knowledge and professional performance. To plan and design the professional growth of teachers today is more than just finding a expert professor to give a workshop or two on a particular topic. Staff development, particularly for the early childhood educators, if it is going to result in their positive change and growth, has to be placed on the shoulders of the teachers themselves. (Joyce and Showers, 1988).

Child development research reveals the powerful and positive effects on children's learning when perceptive and responsible preschool educators apply their skills and beliefs daily in caring and teaching young children. (Honig, 1996). Their goals are to help the youngest citizens of the world to achieve cooperative, prosocial and peaceful ways of living together with a zestful and boundless curiosity for knowledge and a genuine passion for learning. Past pioneers in early childhood education like Froebel and Montessori believed that young children will grow and flourish with the help of dedicated teachers presenting well-thought out materials and child-centered activities but by the 21st century this "judicious provision" of attractive materials in a pleasant environment may not be enough as the main task of an early childhood teacher.

According to Honig (1996) in the future as societies become more technologically demanding and families finding less and time time for socialising their young , the power of the early childhood educator will grow. The roles of the early childhood educator must be professionalised. No longer can any young person (usually a female) be completely qualified to nurture young children without further professional development.

The Need for Professional Development

Fenstermacher and Berliner (1985) more than ten years ago, had already felt that the problems of schooling cannot be simply explained away by "poor teaching" or "inadequately prepared teachers". Due to the shifts in the social, political and economic character of schooling teachers today do need help, and this need is not necessarily because of a lack of skill or commitment. Rather, it is because of the need to understand and keep pace with the rapid changes that impinge on our schools. Today staff development has come to be recognised as one of the important and powerful ways to assist not only teachers but all members of the educational profession. (page 282)

In the early childhood scene, it is no longer possible for teachers to close their classroom doors and disconnect themselves from the world outside. Good teachers may respond very well to individual children but even gifted teachers need the insights and practice that professional training and retraining can provide. The link between formal education or child-related training and the provision of quality education and care has been examined by a number of investigators. (Berk, 1985; Arnett, 1989).

Berk(1985) reported that a university or college training in early childhood education increases the quality of early childhood education programmes. Arnett (1989) found that child-care teachers with 2 to 4 courses at college level were less authoritarian in their attitudes towards children and exhibited a more positive interactive style, with less punitive behaviour and detachment than did control teachers with no college course work. Teachers with university degrees were also more sensitive, less harsh and more appropriate with infants, toddlers and preschoolers than were teachers with less formal education. However teachers, even experienced ones and in the service cannot improve their teaching until they are certain of their own positive beliefs and values. Only changes in these beliefs may translate their traditional classroom activities become more developmentally appropriate.

In the Singapore context, teaching young children has been and will continue to be a demanding profession as it requires a range of skills and knowledge. Early childhood education cannot afford to rely on past experiences and old methods to help children acquire new knowledge, skills and attitudes. Staff professional development for preservice and inservice teachers must be prepared to equip these teachers meet the current educational changes. To be effective, staff development ought to provide opportunities for teachers to REFLECT on their experiences of classroom teaching and to assess critically their ability to cope with contemporary classroom problems.

In his study focussing on the professional development of counselors, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) identify 20 themes of counselor development, one of which addresses the importance of continous professional reflection as a central development process. According to their research based on indepth, semi-structured interviews with 100 participants over a five year period, a recurring and primary characteristic theme which was "extracted" from their data was that "professional development leads to

professional individuation by the essential method of continuous professional reflection." (p 509). This is the major method of professional development across all stages of professional and personal growth. There are three necessary parts of continuous professional reflection and these are in brief 1) an intense professional and personal experience, 2) an open, supportive work environment and 3) a personal capacity for reflection.

Staff development in early childhood education is like building learning into the current teaching job of the early childhood personnel. It has been found that to provide outstanding learning opportunities for these teachers currently in the service, one key ingredient is necessary. According to Renyi (1998) it is important to put these teachers who have a consuming interest in their subject and a passion to teach together with professors, scientists, artists or curators who also have a consuming interest in their subject and a passion to teach. If these adult professionals can share an intense, exhilarating immersion experience together, the teachers will go back to their classrooms with a deepened understanding and great enthusiasm to share the knowledge and inspiration they have acquired with their colleagues.

It is well understood that many teachers, particularly early childhood teachers, do not view personal and/or professional staff development as positively as we would like them to do so for a number of reasons. Teachers complain that staff development upgrading courses are unrelated to their day to day problems, some programmes have unclear objectives planned and implemented without adequate assessment or that inservice training has a focus which is too distant from their personal and professional needs . In addition, there is often a lack of their input in determining issues to be included in the training programmes or that training sessions are scheduled at inconvenient times and dates and there is a failure to provide follow-up activities. There is usually insufficient continuity and/or ineffective evaluation.

According to Clough (1991) most staff development activities violate the principles of adult learning. One important view of early childhood teachers is that they come to learning new experiences with a wide range of previous knowledge, skills interests and competencies. A few of them may want to prescribe their own learning, define their own objectives and select their own assessment and evaluation criteria. Many will resist learning situations if they perceive them as an attack upon their competencies. It is not clearly established if further training or inservice programmes in early childhood education have taken the above principles into consideration, but in order to seek meaningful change and progress in adult learners, it is vital to be aware of these perspectives.

Self Development and the Individualised Approach

Drucker (1974) observes that effective staff development is SELF development. Professional growth is personal in the sense that what motivates each person is an individual matter and this growth begins with a personal need. Individuals develop

slowly by taking responsibility for their own development. Likewise, Clough (1991) stresses a more individualised approach in planning for professional growth. "The best way to proceed in the future is to utilize an individualised approach, thus decentralising the organisational pattern for planning and delivering professional growth activities." (p 2).

In a two-year study of professional development, one of the recommendations made by the NFIE (National Foundation for the Improvement of Education) of the NEA (National Education Association) in USA in 1996 was to help teachers assume responsibility for their own professional development based on students' needs, professional standards, parent input and peer review. This report was grounded in the best that has been done in schools and two important premises have emerged from their quest on how to build higher quality professional development into the schools. The two premises are:

1 .high quality professional development is not a programme or an activity but an ethos. It is a way of being where learning is infused throughout the teachers' working lives.

2. professional development needs to focus on both the individual teacher and the context of the school where he/she works.

According to Renyi (1998) most professional development programmes place the emphasis of learning on the teacher's individual interests, academic discipline, certificate renewal, career path and choice. Today more and more professional development plans are beginning to take the SCHOOL context into consideration. Too often, programmes are provided by a central agency (eg MOE) and they offer "one-size-fits-all" workshops and training packages disregrading the needs of the school and the individual teacher.

In the 1996 NFIE research, the greatest gains found in teacher learning were in places where "whole schools" studied their student results and needs and where they find time to build professional development into their school life eg through flexible scheduling and extended blocks of time. The report shows that when professional development is incorporated into the daily, weekly and yearly job of teaching, it results in changed practices and student success. This kind of professional development is determined "transactionally" by individual teachers working on a long term basis with the school principal and community.

Modern teachers function in a complex environment of organisational structures, communication systems and professional associations. Modern staff development therefore has become an activity that encompasses much more than a single teacher working and acting alone. It is an enterprise of groups of teachers, often working in concert with specialists, supervisors, school administrators, counselors, parents and many other people who are connected with the modern school. As such, staff development is much more than the simple provision of a service to a single teacher or groups of teachers. It also includes the organisational dynamics of the school. (Fenstermacher and Berliner, 1985, p 283)

An Approach in Individualised Staff Development

There are many possible approaches which might be used to individualise staff development. One process, described by Clough (1991 p 2-4) is summarised as follows:

Step I. Teacher/Principal Planning Conference.

a) where teacher and principal collaborate on identifying the teacher's professional growth needs. Objectives need to be specific, realistic and manageable.

b) where they decide on appropriate staff development activities and a relevant time frame for meeting the identified needs. The teacher may decide to work independently or with a colleague.

c) where they decide which procedures will be used to assess the teacher's growth after completion of the identified activities.

d) where decisions made during the initial conference are recorded formally on an individual improvement form.

Step II Teacher Engaged in Professional Growth Activities.

Principals need to be knowledgeable about the kinds and availability of professional growth opportunities for teachers. Possible examples include: peer coaching, attendance at meetings, travel and conferences, college courses, teacher exchanges, curriculum update and cultural experiences.

Step III Progress Update Conference

Several times a year during the school year the teacher needs to meet with the principal in order to report progress toward the identified professional growth activities. The principal serves as a facilitator and in some cases it may be necessary for both of them to modify certain aspects of the teacher's initial plan.

Step IV Teacher Continues to Engage in Professional Growth Activities

Step V Summative Teacher/Principal Conference.

This step is usually conducted at the end of the school year and provides the principal an opportunity to verify documentation of the teacher's participation in appropriate professional growth activities.

Clough agrees that such one-to-one involvement in planning and monitoring individual improvement plans is a very time consuming process but it is important to foster staff development by some systematic, individualised staff development procedure. In early childhood education, as in other teacher preparation programmes, most individuals follow a common pattern of personal and professional development. Effective principals dove-tail their professional growth efforts to match the maturity level of the individual teachers involved.

A successful staff development programme which is both effective and well received by teachers is dependent on several success conditions (Ferstermacher and Berliner, 1985). Early childhood teachers, like their children have different needs at different times which means that these teachers may need different kinds of support and different resources at different stages of their development. This is something which traditional inservice programmes generally do not offer. In addition, experience indicates that the application condition is a very important factor in determining the success or failure of a staff development programme. Ferstermacher and Berliner (1985) quoted in a study that fewer than 20% of the trainees master the skills in a training programme if there is no coaching for application which may be simply hands-on assistance with the problems of transferring new knowledge and skills to the classroom.

Sufficient time therefore must be given for mastery of the content and methods of the programme. As analysed by Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) one other theme which they have extracted from their data is that optimal professional development is a long, slow and erratic process. Over a long term career in early childhood education, the individual developmental process varies greatly. New and experienced teachers may not need the same kind, depth or length of further training.

Concluding Comments

There is little empirical doubt that an individualised approach in the further professional development of early childhood teachers offers an alternative to the traditional inservice training pattern of improving the competencies of these teachers. Evaluation of current research in this area have suggested two good recommendations for future studies.(Fenstermacher and Berliner 1985). Investigation that examines teachers' reasons for participating in staff development is a critical need. What are the incentives for the early childhood teacher to improve himself/herself?. Is participation based on

concern for professional improvement, compliance with administrative mandates, financial motives or some combination of these and other reasons. An understanding of these reasons would enable providers and funded agencies to use the most pertinent strategies to increase teachers' attendance and commitment to worthwhile staff development activities. (p 309)

In addition, longitudinal studies of teachers' perceptions of their professional growth are needed in order to determine whether the professional development of teachers, particularly early childhood teachers has significance at different stages of their career. According to Fenstermavher and Berliner (1985), their research have only just begun to identify the careers of these teachers as having unique stages of development. Such longitudinal studies could also help us understand the long term effects of different types of staff development on career satisfaction and longetivity in the teaching profession.

A successful staff development programme for early childhood teachers which is productive, meaningful and receptive to teachers can therefore be an achievable goal. However as so clearly pointed by Clough (1991) care must be taken to emphasize and build on personal strengths, rather than on remediating personal weakness. When individualized growth opportunities meet teachers' personal and professional needs, higher levels of self-fulfillment and a strong sense of satisfaction will be felt. The individualised approach in staff development of early childhood educators has posed for us a real challenge to enhance effectively the professional growth of these teachers.

References

Arnett, J. (1989). Caregivers in day-care centers: Does training matter? Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 10, 541-552.

Berk, L. (1985). Relationship of caregiver education to child-oriented attitudes, job satisfaction, and behaviours toward children. Child Care Quarterly, 14, 103-129.

Clough, D. (1991) Staff Development: An Individualised Approach. National Staff Development Council Conference. Missouri.

Drucker, P. (1974). Management, tasks, and responsibilities, practices. New York: Harper and Row.

Fenstermacher G. and David Berliner (1985). Determining the Value of Staff Development. The Elementary School Journal, 85, 5, 281-314.

Honig, A. (1996) Training Early Childhood Educators for the Future. Regional conference on Towards Excellence in Early Childhood Education. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Joyce, B. and Beverly Showers. (1988) Student achievement through staff development. New York; Longman.

Renyi, J. (1998). Building Learning into the Teaching Job. Educational Leadership. 55, 5, 70 – 74.

Skovholt, T. and Michael Ronnestad. (1992). Themes in Therapist and Counselor Development. Journal of Counseling and Development. 70, 505-515.